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# Documenting Liberal Arts Education from a Faculty's Perspective: the Rollins College Oral History Archive

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**Documenting Liberal Arts Education from a Faculty's Perspective:  
The Rollins College Oral History Archive**

**Abstract**

Academic archivists have an opportunity to document the lives of key members of the institution. An oral history interview is one way of effectively presenting and preserving institutional history from multiple perspectives. This article discusses a recent oral history program at Rollins College conducted by the College Archives as part of a student-faculty research project. These oral history interviews add human voices to the existing archival records, and enhance the understanding of liberal arts education from a faculty's perspective. As a tool to survey and preserve institutional history, the Rollins oral history research program provided students with meaningful learning experiences, raised the awareness of the special collections, and promoted the value of the archival services in the academic community. The program had as a long-term objective the establishment of a new college tradition to interview each faculty member upon his or her retirement.

**Keywords:** Oral history, college archives

## **Introduction**

Documenting the careers of faculty and staff is a major responsibility of academic archives. To achieve such a goal, the oral history interview is an effective collection method. An oral history is a documentation of a person's experiences and memories in audio and/or video form. Those records are important because personal accounts of an institution's general history and society can be somewhat limited. Most archives should have abundant records of the administrative and official activities and policies of the institution. However, while many college archives contain the personal papers of faculty members, the oral history interview presents a perspective that is alive. To academic archivists, active documentation is essential to ensure that the institutional history is fully recorded from multiple perspectives. While seasoned members of a campus community may arbitrarily share their anecdotes over the years, preserving the history is much more important than enjoying the tale in passing. As Burckel points out: "Recording the interviews before key people leave campus should have a higher priority... These interviews are valuable because they supplement the written record and may be the only autobiographical record a busy professor or administrator leaves" (1975, 390).

Oral history is defined as "a qualitative research process based on personal interviewing, suited to understanding meanings, interpretations, relationships, and subjective experience. Oral history interviews investigate interactions, relationships, dynamics, and contexts" (Baylor University). The outcome of an oral history project is the production of original historical documents, a new primary source for further research. According to Thompson, oral history documentation has shifted the focus of study "from the grand patterns of written history to the awkwardly individual human

lives which are its basis” (2000, 12). The rise of oral history as a research method in social sciences can be traced back to Allan Nevins, a Columbia University historian who founded the Oral History Research Office in 1948 (Swain, 2002). For years, archivists and librarians remained as neutral curators of materials rather than actively engaging in capturing oral history. By the late 1960s, Zachert made a compelling argument summarizing how oral history could impact library and archival operations. According to her, oral history provided a unique opportunity for academic librarians to draw on their research expertise, public relations skills, and knowledge of collections to make a “creative, intellectual contribution” (1968, 102). Bruemmer also noted that the “nature of modern documentation demands oral history as a component of historical research” (1991, 496). In addition to being the curators of information, archivists are challenged to adopt a more active and creative role in documenting history. Samuels argued that “if archivists perceive their responsibility as documenting an institution, then the intervention to create or ensure the creation of records must be an integrated part of their documentary mission” (1992, 13). Since then, oral-based materials have been recognized as a powerful source of information not only by historians and social science researchers, but also by librarians and archivists.

The benefits of an oral history program are multiple. According to Christian, oral histories usually “complement many of the traditional records that may already be available in the archives, since they provide greater context to events described in other records. The interviews often offer a deeper and, arguably, more subjective layer of understanding to an institution’s history. Sometimes an oral history will capture an event that would not be found in traditional sources” (2002, 112). Furthermore, with its unique

advantage of documenting history from a primary source, oral history creates an opportunity for people to reconnect with the past and instill within them a sense of belonging. It also provides those participants with the realization that their life, what they have witnessed and lived through, has intrinsic value (Baranowski and Calderone 2004).

Clearly, oral history has its challenges. Oral history projects are time-consuming and require administrative support, appropriate funding, technical training, and research preparation. Moreover, interviews must be analyzed critically in the context of other documentary sources due to the unreliability of human memory and interviewer and interviewee biases (Swain). However, when undertaken with careful planning and preparation, an oral history project should offer numerous possibilities for the academic archives. It will not only add invaluable and unique documentation to the archives' holdings but it will also benefit more traditional archival duties such as collection development, user service, and outreach in unsuspected and far-reaching ways. The Rollins oral history archive project was launched in the summer of 2005 with the belief that speaking with faculty directly will capture their personal perspectives on varied aspects of academic life, such as classroom instructions, campus activities, interpersonal relationships, professional organizations, scholarly endeavors, and community involvement.

### **Planning and Implementation of the Rollins Oral History Project**

Founded in 1885 by New England Congregationalists who sought to bring their style of liberal arts education to the Florida frontier, Rollins is the oldest recognized college in the state of Florida. It's impossible to walk on the tree-lined campus, stroll along the Walk of Fame, or step inside one of its Spanish Mediterranean style buildings

without sensing the history of the institution. As a comprehensive and independent liberal arts college located in Winter Park, Rollins has a current enrollment of 3,622 full-time equivalent students. The college seeks to educate students for active citizenship in a global society and disseminate the value of a liberal education in the wider community with guiding principles of excellence, innovation, and community.

From its inception, the Olin Library has been an integral part of the instructional, intellectual, and cultural life of Rollins College. As a division of the library, the College Archives was founded in 1933 and formally established in 1954 by the Board of Trustees upon the recommendation of President Hugh McKean. In 1985, it was merged with Special Collections and renamed the Department of College Archives and Special Collections. Located on the first floor of the Olin Library and staffed by a professional librarian and an archival specialist with some student assistance, the department is responsible for acquiring, preserving, and making accessible the official records of the college, and its special, historical collections. In addition to various departmental assignments, the archival librarian is also a member of the college faculty, who regularly engage in teaching activities on library bibliographic instruction and historical research using primary sources from the College Archives.

In the fall of 2004, the College Archives, together with the local public library and historical society, sponsored a free oral history seminar on campus. The program attracted faculty members from the history, anthropology and English Departments as well as members of the local historical community. Following the seminar, the archival librarian submitted a grant proposal for a Rollins oral history archive project to the administration. College funding as part of a student-faculty collaborative research

program in 2005 enabled the employment of two undergraduate students working full-time for eight weeks during the summer. Hence, the project team consisted of the archival librarian together with a junior and a sophomore student, both with previous experience working in the library. The Head of Archives and Special Collections led the undertaking, with the College Historian, a professor of history emeritus, serving as the project consultant as well as an active participant in the program.

The primary goal of the Rollins oral history research project was to provide an open and candid platform for selected faculty members to contemplate their years at Rollins, to reflect upon the challenges they encountered, and celebrate their accomplishments in teaching, scholarship, and community service. The program was designed as an essential step in fully documenting the history of liberal arts education at Rollins College. Moreover, through the research and document creation process, those students involved would also gain a real-life experience of applying research skills learned from classrooms into meaningful practices. The long-term objectives of the project were to establish a comprehensive oral history archive at Rollins, which would include faculty members as well as key staff, administrators, alumni, and friends of the college, and to institute a new college tradition of interviewing each faculty member upon his or her retirement.

As part of a funding requirement, the initial project would have to be implemented and oral history interviews conducted within a period of eight weeks in the summer of 2005. While the first phase of the program aimed to identify attainable goals, conduct research, plan for costs, and explore equipment options, the second phase attempted to ascertain the availability of participants and to formulate questions based on

the historical research. In general, since the project team preferred to explore a broad perspective of Rollins and not to focus on a particular type of individual, the number of years each faculty, staff, or administrative member has served the College was viewed as a primary factor of selection. With assistance from the Human Resources Department, the College Archives contacted nine faculty members and two college administrators with extensive service records. The project team was pleasantly surprised to learn that except for one schedule conflict, all interview candidates agreed enthusiastically to participate in the proposed summer oral history research program. Combined, the selected participants contributed over 322 years of service to the Rollins community. Those individuals included faculty in the sciences, history, and languages, as well as deans and presidents. Their recognitions, among others, included numerous awards, medals, and endowed chairs. However, these facts only partially reveal the achievements of the ten participants. Speaking with the vibrant individuals who have helped shape the college and watching and listening to those people who have lived through the defining moments of Rollins history was a fulfilling experience for every member of the oral history project.

To help an individual prepare for the interview, a list of questions was sent to him or her in advance along with the project information and the oral history interview consent form (See Appendices A and B). However those questions only served as rough guidelines for each session. The project team made efforts to ensure the contents of each interview flowed naturally with one question leading to another rather than isolated responses to random queries. A major challenge during each interview was to determine how to phrase the questions in an unbiased and open-ended way, so as to neither offend nor constrain the interviewee's response. As the project team strived for a general survey



of Rollins' history while providing space for personal reflections and recollections, the selected questions were of a broad nature in order to stimulate lengthy anecdotes. The project team was delighted to find out that every participant had a story to tell. Each individual brought to the conversation his or her perspective on life, pedagogical careers, cultures of Rollins, and so on. Many of these questions led to other topics, such as a chemistry professor's involvement in founding the soccer program at Rollins, a retired president's experiences at other liberal arts institutions, a French professor's adventure with Rollins students in Martinique, and an English professor's discovery of correspondence between William Ernest Henley and Robert Louis Stevenson.

After some deliberations regarding interview location, the actual interviews were conducted in the College Archives. The project team believed that the small and comfortable meeting room space, the quiet library setting, and the relaxed atmosphere would encourage the participants to speak their minds and not worry about the interviewer's reaction, resulting in a more truthful interview. Another contributing factor for this decision was the complexity of technologies involved in the project. Due to recent development in audio-visual technologies, the project team deemed that it was essential to bypass the analog recording method and conduct the proposed program using advanced digital tools. After examining various new recording devices, it was decided that a portable Sony digital voice recorder (Sony IC Recorder ICD-BM1) with an AC adaptor (AC-E30A) would best meet the needs of the project. To insure the sound quality, an external stereo microphone (Sony ECM-MS907) was added. In addition, each session of conversations was documented separately using a GoVideo DVD recorder (VR3930) along with a Hitachi digital camcorder (DZ-MV380A). While hearing the

dialogue conveyed the emotions through the speaker's tone, seeing the facial expressions and accompanying movements brought the stories to life.

Once the project goals were defined and equipment purchased and tested, ten interviews were scheduled from late May to early July 2005. During that time the archival librarian conducted the majority of interview sessions with two students assisting in note taking and camera-monitoring. As this was a faculty-led student collaborative project, each student participant was given the opportunity to research and conduct one interview from the beginning to the end. Since many participants were somewhat elderly, the project team decided to keep each session at 80 minutes, a practical length that would fit on a musical compact disc. Whenever the interview seemed likely to last longer, a second session was scheduled. All interviews followed a broad outline with a focus on teaching, research, administration and community service. In some cases, the project team also raised many unique questions for each participant to contemplate and respond. After each interview, the audio session was then uploaded to the campus computer network using a USB cable, and the digital recording saved as WAV file and burned to archival CD for safekeeping. Duplicates were also made to share with the participants. Next, the recordings were transcribed into Microsoft Word documents, and sent to the interviewees for review and minor editing. Although a few people attempted to revise their interviews extensively, the project team strived to stay faithful to the audio dialogue while clarifying when necessary, following the established transcribing guidelines.

## **Outcome of the Rollins Oral History Project**

After conducting eleven interviews of veteran faculty and administrative members, the project team found that many of the interviewees' perspectives on liberal arts education, their notions of the community, and personal reflections of Rollins are strikingly similar despite unique personalities and varied career paths. What would make a college professor turn down a more lucrative position to come teach at an institution in Florida? A science professor admitted that the beauty of Winter Park, the Rollins campus, and the community swayed his decision to take the job. For others, it was the inter-departmental community. In the same way, an English professor found the relationship between professors and students to be ideal, saying: "What attracted me more than anything else was the faculty and their concern for teaching, their knowledge of their students, and their commitment to their students. I've often said and I would say it again: Rollins faculty members like their students." According to the participants, the sense that the focus of a college education is not in an individual's field of study but a broad spectrum of knowledge has brought many devoted faculty members to central Florida. In addition, interviewees valued the collegial nature, the friendships, and the mutual respect between faculty and students.

The growth of Rollins College in terms of academic quality, as observed by the oral history participants, found its roots in the openness to innovation in the classroom. Throughout the years, many professors have not shied away from trying new approaches in instruction. A science professor remembered how he and a former Rollins student-turned faculty member would teach a course together acting as a teacher-student team. They were able to have fun by teaching and learning at the same time. A history

professor talked about a master learners program where faculty would attend regular classes as a student, and then discuss the connections between them. A religion and philosophy professor reminisced about his service-learning course in Jamaica and other community-related initiatives. Many of the faculty also fondly recalled their team-teaching as well as interdisciplinary courses.

For years, Rollins has grappled with its image - the tropical Florida location has cast a false shadow on the quality of instruction and education students receive at Rollins. In reality, the cordial atmosphere of Rollins helped attract educators who dedicated their careers to teaching Rollins students. The Dean of Admissions emeritus recalled affectionately his efforts to enroll students from across the country, as he was responsible for bringing people such as Fred Rogers and Tony Perkins to Rollins. Through times of trial and times of jubilation, the college administrators have also played leadership roles in support of both the faculty and the students, as evidenced by the testimonies of deans and presidents of the college. Among the participants, agreement on the value of a liberal arts education, on the growth of the community, and on their aspirations for Rollins were virtually unanimous. Every aspect of Rollins, from classroom teaching to student lives to campus development, is interrelated. It is clear that, without the hard work and dedication of faculty, staff, and administrators as well as students, Rollins would not continue to progress. As documented in those sessions, one learns that Rollins' nature is to attract dedicated people, open itself to creativity and change, and to improve itself through the energy of every person involved.

Despite the various challenges, the impact of the Rollins oral history project on college archival operations has been very encouraging. Based on the information

collected thus far, the interviews have clearly enriched the existing archival collections by adding new depth and dimension through various personal experiences. For example, a retired dean recollected his perspective on the Paul Wagner Affair in 1951-52, when the college president was forced to resign from his office. A professor recalled his involvement with student protests during the era of the Vietnam War, and an administrator vividly recalled his role in a dramatic clash between the principle of freedom of expression in theatrical arts and the boisterous opposition from the traditionally conservative community. Those dialogues have added human voices to, and enhanced the understanding of, the official college records. Equally important, the project has become an effective tool for the College Archives to develop valuable relationships and connections in the campus community. The oral history project has raised awareness of the special collections and services provided by the Archives. As the program progressed, some participants provided additional information, and one has agreed to donate to the Archives his collection of student correspondences over the years.

An added benefit to the Rollins oral history project was that it provided the students involved an opportunity to apply research skills learned in classrooms as meaningful practices. As Robyns (2001) pointed out, archivists can and must be more than simply a bridge between archival users and collections. With rich institutional knowledge and resources, academic archivists can and should assist faculty in their teaching efforts and help students learn to approach history actively, creatively, and critically. Notwithstanding the training and the amount of the work, the Rollins oral history program grew to be an effective method to incorporate active learning into real world experiences. At the end of the eight-week period, each team member learned to

value more deeply the endeavors of the faculty and staff at Rollins, and gained a sense of satisfaction from preserving history for future generations. One student noted that she “not only gained a greater understanding of the history of Rollins, but also had an insight into the lives and experiences of ten very dedicated Rollins faculty and administrators and the experience of creating an oral history.” Another student added: “Having just finished my first year, I didn’t know Rollins had such a rich history in the Winter Park community. With this oral history archive, history is brought to life in a sense. I’ve developed a deeper appreciation for history, and for those who seek to preserve it, and this summer research project has helped me understand why the Archives Department plays a pivotal role in Rollins College.”

As mentioned earlier, the ultimate goal of the project is to establish a comprehensive oral history archive, which would include not only faculty members, but also key staff, administrators, alumni, and friends of the college. The project team believed that its initial objective in establishing an oral history program has been reached. At the conclusion of the summer project, web pages for each interview were made, complete with excerpts, audio clips, biographical information, and photographs (Rollins College 2005). A few months after the conclusion of the archival program, the value and timing of the Rollins oral history project was unexpectedly demonstrated. A science professor emeritus who was a project participant suddenly passed away, and his oral history contribution became one of the last recordings ever made in his life. At the request of a family friend, a duplicate copy of the interview was made from the College Archives as a small gesture that was deeply appreciated by the survivors. Encouraged by this anecdote, the project team intends to continue the Rollins oral history research

program in the coming years. In addition to plans for further interviews, efforts are also under way to enhance the Rollins oral history web page and raise the awareness of the project among the campus academic community, the regional and historical community, and the library and archival professions. Currently, the Rollins oral history archive has been reported in the campus and library newsletters, and will be featured in the coming issue of the college's *Alumni Records*. It is the hope of the oral history team that the new web site and further project development would not only share the experiences of the undertaking, but also open the door for interested scholars to begin their research on the history of liberal arts education at Rollins.

## **Conclusion**

When one aims to employ creative methods of documenting the lives of key members of an academic institution, oral history interviewing is one of the best approaches to preserve institutional history from multiple perspectives. A successful oral history program can not only enhance the existing archival collections by providing a perspective that written documents may not fully convey, but also present new avenues for outreach programming in the campus community. Designed as a tool to survey and preserve the institutional history, the Rollins oral history project has added human voices to the existing archival records, and contributed to the understanding of liberal arts education from a faculty's perspective. With a strong commitment and financial support, the Rollins oral research program also engaged students with active learning by encouraging real-life investigation and the creation of primary source information. In

addition, the project has raised the awareness of the special collections, and promoted the value of the archival services in the academic community.

It is important for the Rollins community to study the history of the institution and understand how far the college has come, and what values it was always meant to uphold. For the oral history project team, it was a fascinating and humbling experience to learn firsthand of the dedication, work, and effort of the college's movers and shakers. Looking forward, it would certainly be more meaningful to establish a new college tradition of interviewing each faculty member upon his or her retirement.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Rollins Oral History Interview Sample Questions**

Department of Archives & Special Collections  
Olin Library, Rollins College

1. I understand that most people live in Florida today came from somewhere else. So could you please share with us some of your background such as place of birth, family heritage and childhood years?
2. Can you talk about your formal education, including grade schools and college experiences? What job did you have before you moved to Florida? Could you go over some aspects of your life prior to Rollins that a future historian would find useful in writing about your career at Rollins?
3. What made you decide to come to Rollins?
4. Could you tell us about the life in general when you started to work at Rollins? What was your first impression of the school and the student body? Who were some of the important faculty and administrative leaders when you arrived?

Did that impression change over time? In your view, how different is it from today's life on campus in terms of administrative structure, teaching responsibilities, faculty relations, and student activities?

5. What are some the significant or memorable events you have experienced while working at Rollins? Can you recall any anecdote or story you remember that would reveal the character of the school during you tenure?
6. What courses have you taught over the years at Rollins? What course(s) that you enjoyed the most, and Why? What course(s) that you feel was a challenge or downright frustration, and why?

Is there any particular moment(s) or special student(s) over your teaching career that you will always remember? Tell us more about that. Recall outstanding or notable students and tell us what happened to them.

7. While at Rollins, what research and scholarship activities that you have conducted? Could list some of your publications, and go over with us their contributions and impact to your field of study?

8. What kind of college service activities have you performed while a faculty member of Rollins? What about your involvement in professional organizations and community activities?
9. Now look back, how do you view your Rollins career?
10. In your opinion, what are the proudest achievements during your tenure at Rollins? What is your regret if you have any? If you had an opportunity to start fresh again, what would you do differently in your academic life?

## **Appendix B**

### **Oral History Interview Consent Form**

Department of Archives & Special Collections  
Olin Library, Rollins College

I give my permission to use any notes, recordings and photographs made during the Rollins Oral History Research project. I understand materials may be housed in the Rollins Archives' Oral History Collection. These materials will be made available to students, researchers and the public for scholarly and educational purposes including publications, exhibitions, and presentations on the Internet or other media.

By giving my permission, I do not forfeit any copyright or performance rights that I may hold.

I agree to the uses of these materials as described above.

<hr/> Interviewee	<hr/> Date
<hr/>	<hr/>
<hr/> Name in Print	<hr/> Address
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<hr/> Interviewer	<hr/> Date